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Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Human Rights Council the report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba. In the report, which covers the period from December 2016 to December 2017, the Special Representative outlines the activities undertaken in discharging her mandate and the progress achieved in addressing grave violations against children. The Special Representative also explores the challenges in strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including by addressing the impact of trafficking and the sale of children in situations of armed conflict, the emerging and recurrent challenges related to the denial of humanitarian access to children and progress in ending grave violations against children, in particular through direct engagement with parties to conflict. Lastly, the Special Representative sets out recommendations addressed to the Human Rights Council and Member States to further the protection of children's rights.

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Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

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I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from December 2016 to December 2017 and is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 71/177, in which the Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to submit a report to the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits, on the progress achieved and the challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda.

II. A vision going forward following 20 years of the children and armed conflict mandate

2. Since the inception of the mandate, the Special Representative and the Office of the Special Representative have played a central role in strengthening the protection of the rights of children affected by armed conflict, including through raising awareness and ensuring that the issue is prioritized on the international agenda. The appointment of the new Special Representative, Virginia Gamba, in early May 2017, therefore presented a timely opportunity to look forward and analyse how efforts could be elevated to end and prevent grave violations affecting children in conflict. To that end, the new Special Representative is aiming to enhance her mandated activities, both in terms of raising public awareness to mobilize global action and garnering lessons learned, and developing best practices to aid practitioners and Member States. Geneva-based mechanisms and entities will be a key part of that vision moving forward.

3. In the two decades since the establishment of the mandate, the United Nations has developed innovative methods to engage with both Governments and armed groups for the benefit of children most affected by war. As a result, 29 action plans have been signed with parties to conflict to end violations against children and establish mechanisms to prevent them. Where the context was conducive and political will was strong, steady progress was achieved, which led to the full implementation of action plans and the subsequent delisting of 11 parties to conflict from the annexes to the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. That represents a significant impact on the protection of the rights of children during armed conflict.

4. The public awareness campaign, entitled "Children, Not Soldiers", launched jointly with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2014, catalysed further progress to protect children affected by armed conflict. The campaign, which focused on one of the six grave violations, namely ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children, led to tangible results. With greater awareness of the issue, the Special Representative, together with UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Political Affairs, was able to expedite progress, and child protection advisers on the ground played a critical role in operationalizing action plans and further strengthening the overall child protection architecture. Concrete advances included the criminalization of the recruitment and use of children, the issuance of military command orders, the systematic screening of troops, the adoption of age-assessment guidelines, the development of handover protocols and the release and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces.

5. A range of other initiatives by the Special Representative and her Office have also had an impact, such as supporting the development of national legislation to protect children; accountability initiatives; advocating for the ratification of international instruments; and leveraging peace processes to engage with parties to conflict on children affected by violations, notably in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Nevertheless, the complexity of the current contexts of armed conflict has contributed to an increase in the number of children at risk in situations where human rights violations are occurring. The mandate is therefore at a critical juncture and both the international community and civil society will need to reflect on how to renew their commitment to build on past achievements and work towards the goal of providing the best possible protection for children affected by war. This juncture corresponds with the opportunities provided by the

Sustainable Development Goals to endeavour to reach those who are the furthest behind, by working in partnership to ensure that children affected by armed conflict are protected from recruitment and use, provided with education and given the ability to live their lives in a heathy and peaceful manner.

6. To this end, as mandated by the General Assembly, the Special Representative plans to establish the capacity to enhance synergies among different United Nations agencies, regional and subregional organizations, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society to raise further awareness of the six grave violations against children. In coordination with Geneva-based entities, the Special Representative considers it vital to commence exercises on lessons learned to identify best practices through research, analysis, assessment and working partnerships that can shed further light on the past 20 years of the collective work of the Organization on children and armed conflict, and identify difficulties encountered in strengthening the protection of children and ongoing trends and dynamics to inform future action.

7. It is essential to engage additional actors in pursuit of greater protection of children's rights and enhance engagement with actors where partnerships are already in place. In that regard, the Human Rights Council has reaffirmed that regional arrangements play an important role in promoting and protecting human rights.[1] The Special Representative therefore considers that partnerships with regional and subregional organizations can be developed or further advanced to secure politically or legally binding instruments to strengthen the prevention of violations in situations of armed conflict and facilitate programmatic responses when violations do occur. Among the regional organizations with which the Special Representative envisions enhancing engagement are the African Union, the League of Arab States and the European Union. Similarly, the Special Representative hopes to continue and strengthen the existing collaboration with such organizations as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the pursuit of best practices and with the aim of supporting the development of additional operational procedures that adequately take into account child protection concerns.

8. Engagement will also be pursued with subregional organizations, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States and the Andean Community. Such engagement has historical roots in the work of the Office of the Special Representative; focusing on subregional organizations has the potential to be a multiplier for further progress. For instance, in the early 2000s, ECOWAS progressively integrated child protection into its policies and institutions, including through the adoption of the Accra Declaration and Plan of Action on War-Affected Children, at the Conference on War-Affected Children in West Africa, held in Ghana on 27 and 28 April 2000; established a child protection unit in its secretariat; and endorsed an agenda for action for war-affected children in West Africa at the ECOWAS summit in 2003. The Special Representative plans to contribute to further progress by supporting the re-establishment of such instruments and mechanisms and creating new partnerships to leverage the tools of a broad range of subregional organizations.

9. The additional focus on advocacy and lessons learned will feed into the overarching goal of the mandate, namely strengthening the protection of the rights of children affected by armed conflict. It is envisioned that lessons learned and raising public awareness will aid interactions with parties to conflict when violations against children occur. Best practices can be used to assist parties to conflict who demonstrate a willingness to better protect children by ensuring that the conduct of hostilities complies with international standards. When a party to conflict is open to entering into dialogue, the plethora of best practices that have been developed over the past 20 years can guide technical discussions on protecting children's rights. However, to draw on the full potential of those best practices, it will be important to compile, capture and make them available to Governments, protection actors and other relevant entities. Awareness-raising, on the other hand, can be used to put pressure on belligerents who do not demonstrate the same willingness to improve their

[1] See Council resolution 34/17.

conduct. By using the different avenues of public awareness, political advocacy and direct engagement, parties may display greater receptiveness to improving their conduct and reducing violations against children. Those prevention efforts are at the heart of the Special Representative's goals of protecting the rights of children.

III. Progress and challenges in addressing grave violations against children in armed conflict

A. Denial of humanitarian access and its impact on the human rights of children

10. In recent years, the denial of humanitarian access to children in armed conflict has become a more prevalent violation and in 2016, 994 incidents were verified by the United Nations. Almost half of those incidents took place in South Sudan, which suffered a 100 per cent increase in incidents as compared with 2015. In 2017, humanitarian access continued to be regularly denied in numerous situations. For example, in the Syrian Arab Republic in the early part of the year, parties to the conflict used besiegement as a method of warfare, depriving nearly 650,000 persons of access to food and other essential commodities, including life-saving and life-sustaining medical items. Deliberate bureaucratic impediments and restrictions by the Government, in addition to a fragile security situation and access limitations imposed by armed groups, further prevented the delivery of humanitarian assistance. In South Sudan in 2017, humanitarian actors continued to be harassed and assaulted and came under attack as they conducted their activities. In one incident in Central Equatoria, six humanitarian actors were fired upon and killed as they attempted to reach populations in need. Humanitarian access in Rakhine State in Myanmar was also very limited during the reporting period. In March, for instance, travel restrictions for civilians cost the life of a 2-year-old child, as the child's parents were unable to obtain a "village departure certificate" in time to allow for his transfer to hospital. In early 2017, across the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, 182,000 children had no access to assistance, owing to a significant reduction in the humanitarian space to operate, caused by the fragile security situation. In Yemen, restrictions on the import and movement of aid around the country exacerbated the direct impact of conflict on children. At the time of writing in December, in addition to the world's worst cholera outbreak that affected children throughout 2017, the United Nations estimated that nearly 400,000 children were suffering from acute malnutrition.

11. Such instances, which were also observed in other country situations, point to a trend of the politicization of the provision of humanitarian access for the delivery of aid, even when it is intended for children. As the Secretary-General noted in his report on the protection of civilians, humanitarian action must remain distinct from political or military objectives (S/2017/414). That principle is especially salient when assistance is intended to provide relief for children who are vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. In that regard, the Special Representative notes that the Human Rights Council has recently called upon States to respect, protect and fulfil the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, with special attention paid to groups in vulnerable situations.[2] It is clear that children affected by conflict experience heightened levels of vulnerability and protection of their right to food, water and sanitation should be prioritized.

12. Furthermore, when humanitarians are denied access to one of the most vulnerable strata of the population, children with disabilities, it is especially egregious, as they and their families face almost insurmountable obstacles to reaching much-needed assistance by other means. Unaccompanied children fleeing conflict-affected areas without family members or trusted adults who can take care of them face similar challenges in accessing humanitarian services. The challenge of undertaking journeys that are required to reach

[2] See Council resolution 35/23.

health-care facilities in conflict-affected areas with poor infrastructure, limited transportation and restrictions of movement are exponentially multiplied for those at-risk groups. Parties to conflict, as well as the relevant administrative authorities, need to be cognizant of the fact that denying essential aid to children can result in many more child deaths and is an egregious addition to the direct impact of hostilities. Even in instances when such services may not be considered an immediate life-saving activity, for example when vaccination campaigns are necessary, children can sustain long-term injuries or die if access is denied.

13. In that regard, the Special Representative urges parties to conflict to commit to a renewed focus on depoliticizing the issue and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid to children. Those entities are reminded that it is a principle of customary international law that they must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of aid to the civilian population in need in areas subject to their control. Furthermore, contained in regional human rights instruments[3] and numerous resolutions of the Human Rights Council, General Assembly and Security Council is a demand that parties to conflict provide access for relief personnel to refugee and displaced populations, often with special reference to the plight of children. Lastly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international human rights instrument, has several provisions that necessitate the facilitation of humanitarian relief to children in need, including ensuring that children seeking refugee status receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance.[4]

14. In a practical sense, the Special Representative urges parties to conflict to disseminate clear orders among their rank and file to specify that humanitarian assistance for children should be facilitated in all circumstances. Penalties should also be laid out for those who fail to adhere to this principle. She calls upon the Human Rights Council to support her call and encourages the inclusion of a focus on accountability for the denial of humanitarian access to children in the next annual full-day meeting of the Human Rights Council on the rights of the child, which will focus on the theme of "Protecting the rights of the child in humanitarian situations".

B. Grave violations, trafficking and the sale of children

15. The crimes of trafficking and the sale of children are closely linked to the six grave violations affecting children in situations of armed conflict, as identified by the Security Council. According to the definition outlined in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, trafficking is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation". For children, the means is irrelevant and therefore it is simply the "action" and "purpose" that result in trafficking (see art. 3 (c) of the Protocol). The sale of children is defined in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, which states that the "sale of children means any act or transaction whereby a child is transferred by any person or group of persons to another for remuneration or any other consideration".

16. In that context, the recruitment and use of children nearly always constitutes trafficking. The action (recruitment) and purpose (exploitation) are intrinsic elements of the

[3] See, for example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, art. 23; the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women, art. 9; and principles 4 and 19 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. See also Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, *Customary International Humanitarian Law, vol. I: Rules*, rule 131 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross, 2005).

[4] See Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts. 6, 22 (1), 24 and 27.

grave violation. Recruitment and use may also lead to the sale of children in certain circumstances, as parties to conflict trade human resources, depending on the current state of the conflict. Additionally, children, especially those who are unaccompanied, may be sold or trafficked into areas of armed conflict to serve as combatants (A/72/164). Rape and other forms of sexual violence are also very clearly linked to trafficking and to the sale of children, as armed groups often traffic children for sexual purposes and sometimes use sales to sustain their activities financially. Abduction and, in certain instances, the deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed groups, can also amount to trafficking when it is for exploitative purposes, and can also result in the sale of children.

17. While such grave violations have a clear and direct link to the trafficking in and sale of children, other grave violations are linked in less intuitive ways. For example, attacks on schools and hospitals can be used to abduct children, but those violations can also make children more vulnerable to additional abuses and violations. Destroying schools and hospitals and denying education opportunities leave children more vulnerable to trafficking and sale, as they will be forced to seek education, or even employment, elsewhere. Moreover, the denial of humanitarian access may also leave children more vulnerable to trafficking, as they are forced to find ways to leave areas where insufficient aid is getting through. The increasing displacement of children from conflict zones is a linked and equally concerning issue. As the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material and the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, have noted: "Threats faced by boys and girls do not end when they leave their home countries" (see A/72/164, para. 32). In that regard, safe spaces are needed in displacement settings to protect children, particularly those who are separated or unaccompanied, from grave violations, trafficking and sale.

18. Recognizing links and developing synergies between entities working on the grave violations, trafficking and sale of children is crucial to enhancing the response for children who are affected by violations in situations of armed conflict. In that regard, in the reporting period, the Office of the Special Representative supported the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the development of a thematic paper on countering trafficking in persons in conflict situations.

19. Given the overlapping nature of the constituent elements of some of those crimes, it is particularly important to link up legal responses so that children have redress when they are victims. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, States parties are required to prevent, prohibit and criminalize the exploitation and abuse of children. However, national legislation is sometimes incomplete or legal lacunas exist between the different abuses and violations. Partners working on those topics should therefore be proactive in undertaking comprehensive analyses of legislation to advocate for the different paths to accountability for child victims.

20. In that regard, the action plans that have been signed between the United Nations and the parties listed in the annex to the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict regarding the recruitment and use of children frequently contain provisions pertaining to the criminalization of that practice (A/72/361-S/2017/821). In other countries where action plans have not been put in place, the recruitment and use of children is not always a criminal matter, but is considered a disciplinary issue under the code of conduct for the military. In those situations, it is important to identify other avenues for accountability. UNODC indicates that 158 countries have criminalized most or nearly all forms of trafficking.[5] Therefore, when recruitment and use is not specifically criminalized in a country, the prosecution of perpetrators can be pursued through trafficking legislation. Such linkages are equally true for support services to victims of abuse and violations. When support services are weak for children who have suffered grave violations, avenues should

[5] *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.16.IV.6).

be sought so that they benefit from services available to victims of trafficking and sale or even modern slavery, where applicable.

21. The principle of non-criminalization of victims of trafficking is also in line with the approach taken with respect to victims of grave violations. In resolution 2331 (2016), the Security Council emphasized that the United Nations should assist Member States, upon request, with identification of and assistance for victims of trafficking, including ensuring "that victims are treated as victims of crime and in line with domestic legislation not penalized or stigmatized for their involvement in any unlawful activities in which they have been compelled to engage." That is clarified by the Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking, which indicate that trafficked persons should not be criminalized for unlawful activities that they were involved in as a direct consequence of their situation as trafficked persons. That approach to victims of trafficking is coherent with the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, which indicate that children who are accused of crimes under international law allegedly committed while they were associated with armed forces or armed groups should be considered primarily as victims of offences against international law. Those are reinforcing assertions that children should be treated as victims of violations and that criminal proceedings should be avoided for such victims.

22. The Special Representative is encouraged by the advance that regional organizations have made in the non-criminalization of victims of trafficking. For example, article 26 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings states that: "Each Party shall ... provide for the possibility of not imposing penalties on victims for their involvement in unlawful activities, to the extent that they have been compelled to do so." Article 14 (7) of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, stipulates that: "Each party shall ... consider not holding victims of trafficking in persons criminally or administratively liable, for unlawful acts committed by them, if such acts are directly related to the acts of trafficking."

23. As the Special Representative plans to work with regional and subregional organizations, as outlined above, the further enhancement of synergies to augment the response to the trafficking, sale and grave violations affecting children in armed conflict will be an important element. Working with regional and subregional organizations on the non-criminalization of victims of trafficking, sale and grave violations will be a crucial element. The Special Representative will work with United Nations partners, including the International Labour Organization, UNODC, the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material and the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, to further those aims and encourages the Human Rights Council to support these initiatives.

C. Engagement with government forces

24. Following the formal conclusion of the campaign "Children, Not Soldiers", which ended in 2016, the Office of the Special Representative continued to engage with government parties listed for the recruitment and use of children in the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/72/361-S/2017/821). Drawing on the continuing momentum, political will, local ownership and international support to end and prevent the recruitment of children by national security forces in conflict situations, a number of the Governments listed worked to implement action plans to ensure children would not be part of their armed forces.

25. Since the first Government signed an action plan to end and prevent recruitment of children into the ranks of its armed forces in 2006, thousands of children have been released and reintegrated with the assistance of UNICEF, peacekeeping and political missions, and other United Nations entities and partner NGOs on the ground, and new recruitment has been prevented in many situations. Notably, in 2017, the Democratic Republic of the Congo met the benchmarks set out in the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment of children by its armed forces and was subsequently delisted for that violation

from the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (ibid.). In Afghanistan, the adoption of the age verification guidelines, which are used in child protection units that have been set up in 32 of 34 Afghan National Police recruitment centres, have to date prevented over 1,416 boys and 16 girls from joining the police. Moreover, in a related development in November, 50 children formerly held in the adult detention facility in Parwan on charges related to national security were transferred to a juvenile rehabilitation centre in Kabul, which should facilitate their access to psychosocial and vocational services. In December 2016, the Ministry of Defence of Afghanistan also signed a policy for the protection of children in armed conflict that includes guidance on responses to the six grave violations and accountability measures.

26. The implementation of the action plan signed with the Government of the Sudan in 2016 has been going well, with the development of a workplan on the implementation of the commitments made in the action plan. Command orders for the dissemination of the action plan were issued and focal points at the rank of Inspector-General were appointed to facilitate discussions on access. In Myanmar since 2012, over 850 children and young people recruited as children have been released from the ranks of the armed forces. In early 2017, the Government of Myanmar endorsed the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups but, along with Somalia, has still to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

27. Ongoing crises have hampered progress in the implementation of action plans in Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, but advocacy has continued to secure the release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. In addition, amidst the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, government forces and pro-government militia were listed in the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for the recruitment and use of children in 2017 (ibid.). The Office will continue to engage to gain additional commitments to protect children with all Governments that demonstrate political will towards that goal.

28. Engagement with Government armed forces also catalysed interaction with non-State armed groups to respond to and prevent violations. More than 50 per cent of armed groups included in the annexes to the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for the recruitment and use of children are active in countries where government forces are also listed, illustrating that the actions of armed groups are influenced by the conduct of government forces (ibid.). In that regard, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, progress on the implementation of the action plan has energized a broader national campaign to raise awareness of the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, which, among other things, is using the national football team and local artists as spokespersons. The initiative aims to engender a greater recognition among commanders of non-State armed groups of the legal and political repercussions associated with the recruitment of boys and girls.

29. The success of engagement on the recruitment and use of children has opened additional avenues to strengthening child protection on a broader scale by increasing the awareness of parties to conflict of the impact of all six grave violations. In that regard, where appropriate, new action plans signed with parties to conflict go beyond ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children and include other grave violations. A new campaign, currently being elaborated by the Office of the Special Representative, will build on this momentum and focus on all six grave violations.

30. To fully realize the goals of creating child-free armies, children formerly associated with armed forces must be appropriately reintegrated into society to prevent them from being re-recruited, thus breaking the cycle of violence. Following the release of children from armed forces or groups, a focus must be placed on the adequate programming and funding of reintegration programmes. Children who have been recruited and used carry the scars of conflict, thus effective reintegration is vital so that they can live full lives and contribute to a peaceful society. Girls face even greater difficulties in being accepted back into their families and communities, as they are often stigmatized or may be returning with a child. Similarly, boys who have suffered sexual violence will face high levels of stigmatization. Without adequate reintegration and assistance to help children find ways to

become productive members of their communities who can benefit from exercising the full range of their human rights, those girls and boys may not be in a position to contribute to peace and development efforts.

31. Community-based reintegration services that provide psychosocial assistance to children have been designed to help them reclaim their lives through educational and vocational opportunities, taking into account the particular needs of girls. Equally, preparing affected communities to welcome and reintegrate children formerly recruited by armed forces or groups into their midst, is an integral part of community-based processes. In that regard, the Special Representative reiterates her call to Member States and regional and subregional organizations to ensure that the resources for separation and reintegration are sufficient and that there is a focus on sustainability, including by ensuring that children are reintegrated into safe and secure environments and provision is made to prioritize their access to education. She urges the Human Rights Council to continue to focus on this issue in relevant resolutions and other relevant forums.

D. Addressing grave violations by non-State armed groups

32. Building on advances made with government armed forces to prevent the recruitment of children, the United Nations has enhanced its engagement with armed groups with the same aim. In that regard, the United Nations has continued direct engagement with the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia to ensure the timely release and reintegration of children associated with the armed group. In addition, in September the National Liberation Army agreed to a bilateral and temporary ceasefire agreement with the Government, which included a commitment to suspend the recruitment of minors below 15 years of age into the ranks.

33. In the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces continued to implement their action plan pertaining to the recruitment and use of children. The group put in place all the elements necessary to prevent the recruitment of children and all 1,869 children identified by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front as associated with its armed wing underwent formal disengagement in a series of ceremonies, the last of which took place in March 2017. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front also promulgated a directive that requires regular self-monitoring and screening of armed elements, as well as age assessment guidelines to establish internal safeguards for preventing the association and reassociation of children. Following the full implementation of the action plan, the group was delisted from the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (ibid.). The provision of services, including the development of life skills and vocational opportunities, will be important to minimize the risk of children being reassociated.

34. In the Sudan, following the signature of an action plan in November 2016, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North committed to ensuring the release of children present in their ranks and to taking the measures necessary to halt child recruitment and use, including through the issuance and dissemination of military orders and the appointment of a high-level focal point to coordinate and collaborate with the United Nations to ensure the full implementation of the action plan. The group also pledged to facilitate the reintegration of the children into their communities and provide for their access to education.

35. Engagement by the United Nations with non-State armed groups also resulted in the signing of two new action plans in the reporting period. In March 2017 in Mali, the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad signed an action plan with the United Nations to prevent the recruitment of children and the use of sexual violence against them. This was a particularly positive development in the light of the fact that all entities under the umbrella of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad are bound by the provisions of the action plan, despite the fact that only the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad is listed in the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict as having put in place measures to protect children (ibid.). In September 2017, the United Nations also signed an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Civilian Joint Task Force in Nigeria. In October, the president of that group issued a standing order

to instruct all 35 sector commanders to immediately end and prevent the recruitment of children.

IV. Raising global awareness and mainstreaming

A. Field visits and awareness-raising

36. Field visits and awareness-raising remained a central aspect of the activities of the Special Representative and her Office in the reporting period. In that regard, following the sustained exchanges with the Government of Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the process guarantors, the Special Representative travelled to Colombia in November 2017. In her exchanges with representatives of the Government, she emphasized that the reintegration of released children should be the priority of all parties. Staff of her Office also travelled on technical missions in the reporting period to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, South Sudan and the Sudan, in order to advance key priorities relating to children and protection from armed conflict. In October, a technical team from the Office travelled to Saudi Arabia to engage with the newly-formed child protection unit of the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen to provide assistance for improving the protection of children in Yemen.

37. In terms of awareness-raising, in February 2017, the Special Representative gave an address in Brussels at the high-level opening of the international conference on children and armed conflict, organized by Belgium under the theme "Sharing experiences of developing and implementing child protection policies in conflict settings". She also chaired a panel on the implementation of Security Council resolutions in the field. During the conference, the importance of identifying and sharing best practices between different organizations on developing and implementing child protection policies, including training and guidance, was emphasized.

38. In New York in February 2017, the President of the General Assembly convened an informal meeting to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the children and armed conflict mandate. Panellists and Member States expressed their continued strong support for the mandate, emphasizing that at a time when emerging and protracted conflicts were disrupting the lives of millions of boys and girls around the world, the mandate was more relevant than ever. On the occasion of the anniversary, the Special Representative published a booklet entitled "20 years to better protect children affected by conflict" on the work accomplished in the 20 years since the establishment of the mandate, which is available in English and French.[6]

39. Also in February 2017, the Special Representative participated in a ministerial-level international conference in Paris, co-hosted by the Government of France and UNICEF in collaboration with the steering group on the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Paris commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups and the Principles and Guidelines. The Special Representative delivered a speech during the plenary session and presented, among other elements, the outcome of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign.

40. The Office of the Special Representative also took part in an annual workshop on children and armed conflict and women, peace and security, organized by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany in Berlin in April 2017. Concrete opportunities for Member States and regional organizations to deepen their engagement with regard to the protection of children affected by conflict were put forward on that occasion.

41. In June 2017 in London, the Special Representative was invited to be part of a high-level panel discussion on encouraging respect for the law by non-State armed groups on the

[6] Available from https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/commemorating-20-years-of-work-for-children/.

occasion of a conference organized by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the British Red Cross on the theme "Modern armed conflict and the evolution of international humanitarian law". During that visit, the Special Representative also met with representatives of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and a number of London-based NGOs. During the same trip, the Special Representative travelled to Berlin to meet with counterparts in the German Federal Foreign Office to discuss child protection concerns. In August, the Special Representative also met with the Assistant Secretary-General for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

42. Many initiatives in the reporting period were directly related to the children and armed conflict elements of the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, in October, the Special Representative addressed the Security Council in an Arria formula meeting organized by the Permanent Mission of Italy and its partners, the Permanent Missions of France, Sweden and Uruguay, on the issue of attacks on schools. During her intervention, the Special Representative focused on the need for protecting the right to education for those affected by armed conflict. In December, members of her Office travelled to Panama to make a presentation at a meeting entitled "Strengthening the role of defence actors in protecting education from attack and schools from military use", which was organized by the Governments of Argentina, Norway and Panama and the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. The disengagement, demobilization and reintegration of children in situations of armed conflict also remained an area of concern for the Special Representative during the reporting period. In that regard, she spoke at a high-level meeting on the topic with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Belgium in New York in October. She also held two meetings with representatives of the World Bank in the reporting period to discuss collaboration on the protection of children, particularly related to the reintegration of children formerly associated with parties to conflict. During her visits to Washington, D.C., the Special Representative took the opportunity to meet with key counterparts in the State Department and representatives of Congress. The Special Representative also gave a keynote speech on the impact of conflict on children at the Stimson Center. On the same topic, in December 2017 she travelled to South Africa to attend a brainstorming and planning session on the treatment of former child soldiers from Mozambique.

43. Throughout the reporting period, the Office of the Special Representative supported the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in the development of a thematic paper on trafficking in situations of conflict, which aims to enhance the response of the United Nations to such crimes. To that end, in September, members of the Office travelled to Vienna to take part in an expert group meeting on the topic of trafficking in conflict zones. In November in Milan, the Special Representative attended the thirty-ninth annual forum of Parliamentarians for Global Action on the theme of preventing violent extremism and mass atrocities, at which she participated in a panel on "Addressing the drivers and root causes of violent extremism and mass atrocities and identifying successful strategies for deradicalization". That same month, she spoke on the topic of "Crisis and conflict: protecting the most vulnerable" at the fourth Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour in Buenos Aires. That interaction continues the strong collaboration with the International Labour Organization, particularly regarding the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

B. Working with regional organizations

African Union

44. The strong partnership between the Special Representative and the African Union has continued and the Special Representative travelled to N'Djamena in October to take part in a retreat for special envoys and mediators. The retreat focused on the emerging world order, multilateralism and Africa, and the Special Representative worked with

participants to highlight the concerns about children and armed conflict relevant to their work.

European Union

45. In February and June 2017, the Special Representative addressed the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union and in June 2017, she also addressed the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights and met in Brussels with the European Union Special Representative for Human Rights. During those meetings, views and information were exchanged on the impact of armed conflict on children and on ways to further strengthen the cooperation between the European Union and the Office of the Special Representative with regard to the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

League of Arab States

46. Pursuant to the cooperation agreement between the League of Arab States and the Office of the Special Representative signed in 2014, the Special Representative continued to engage with the League of Arab States, including to advocate for ratification by all members of the League of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to explore areas for further cooperation and joint advocacy for the protection of children affected by armed conflicts in the region. Building on that progress, the Office will seek to further deepen engagement with the League during the next reporting period.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

47. The Special Representative engaged with NATO, with a view to deepening the partnership on the issue of children and armed conflict. In January 2017 in New York, she met with the Commander of the Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces Afghanistan, and in February 2017 in Brussels, she met with the Deputy Secretary-General of NATO to discuss ways to further strengthen the protection of children in NATO-led operations.

48. The Office of the Special Representative contributed to the development of NATO policies and guidelines on children and armed conflict, including through attending a training session on children and armed conflict in September held in Izmir, Turkey, and participated in discussions on operationalizing the policy in the Resolute Support Mission, which were held in December 2017 in Kabul.

Organization of Islamic Cooperation

49. In 2017, the Office of the Special Representative continued its collaboration with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in particular with the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission and held a number of meetings to discuss issues of mutual interest and areas for future engagement.

C. Building support with civil society

50. Strengthening relationships with academia and civil society and NGOs working on the issue of children and armed conflict is a key priority for the Special Representative. She addressed Member States and civil society organizations through a video message at the second international conference on safe schools, held in Buenos Aires in March 2017. In addition, in recent months, the new incumbent has held joint briefings to share information on her priorities for the Office and to discuss ways of maintaining the focus on the children and armed conflict agenda. The Special Representative met with over 50 organizations, in London, Brussels, Geneva, New York and a number of other places in the second half of 2017. In Geneva, close collaboration has continued with the Child Rights Connect working group in order to mainstream the work on children and armed conflict in a number of Geneva-based processes.

D. Building support for partnerships with human rights entities and United Nations mechanisms

51. The Special Representative continues to engage with Member States that have not already ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, with the aim of achieving universal ratification thereof and enhancing the legal protection of children's rights in conflicts. In the reporting period, she held bilateral meetings with Member States and actively engaged with regional and subregional organizations, civil society and regional groups on the matter. The Central African Republic became a State party to the Optional Protocol during the reporting period. The Special Representative has also used those engagements to push for the endorsement of other instruments that will improve the protection of the rights of children in situations of armed conflict, such as the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups and the Safe Schools Declaration. In that regard, during the reporting period, the Special Representative and her Office worked with the Government of Yemen to support its endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration, which it signed in October.

52. The Special Representative continued to prioritize close cooperation between her Office and international human rights mechanisms, in particular the universal periodic review, the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee. In that regard, her Office submitted three contributions in the previous reporting period to the universal periodic review process on the Philippines, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic. The Special Representative notes that during the review of the Philippines, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in his letter to the Foreign Minister, reiterated the points noted in the submission of the Office of the Special Representative by urging the Government of the Philippines to prioritize the passage of the draft law on children in situations of armed conflict to ensure better protection of children against grave violations in the context of armed conflict and take measures to prevent the abduction and recruitment of children by armed groups. In the case of the Syrian Arab Republic and South Sudan, many Member States highlighted the protection of children in the context of armed conflict during the respective interactive dialogues. The Special Representative encourages the Human Rights Council to continue to address issues related to children and armed conflict for relevant countries; welcomes the practice of adopting concrete recommendations; and encourages references to the relevant findings of treaty bodies and special procedures mandate holders to ensure sustained mainstreaming and follow-up by the various actors involved in the protection of children's rights.

53. Treaty bodies have continued to play an important role in identifying gaps between the legal and policy framework and the practice regarding children and armed conflict, and have made recommendations to address any shortcomings. In that regard, the Special Representative is encouraged that the situation of children affected by armed conflicts in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been outlined in the respective concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC/C/CAF/CO/2 and CRC/C/COD/CO/3-5). Those are strong concluding observations, which mirror the messaging of the submission of the Office of the Special Representative though their focus on prioritizing peace talks, criminalizing the recruitment and use of children and pursuing accountability for grave violations against children, as well as enhancing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes for children. During a meeting with the President of the Central African Republic in September, the Special Representative also emphasized these messages and offered the support of the United Nations. Moving forward, the Office will work with United Nations colleagues on the ground in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to provide support for the swift implementation of the important recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

54. The Special Representative travelled to Geneva on three occasions during the reporting period. In December 2016, the previous Special Representative was invited by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the ninth annual dialogue on protection challenges on the theme "Children on the move". In her speech, she focused, among other

things, on ways to improve the international protection response for children affected by conflict. In March 2017, the previous Special Representative also travelled to Geneva to present her annual report for 2016 to the Human Rights Council.

55. In June, the new Special Representative travelled to Geneva to meet with Geneva-based counterparts and to reinforce the work of her Office with entities based there, to which she introduced her vision for the future of the mandate and articulated her view for enhanced partnerships moving forward. In that context, she met with the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, which is co-chaired by Belgium and Uruguay, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees and for Human Rights. She also attended meetings with the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bern.

56. Within the United Nations system, the Office of the Special Representative has continued to support the efforts developed as part of the Secretary-General's Human Rights Up Front initiative. Concerns relating to children and armed conflict have also been mainstreamed in Organization-wide initiatives on human rights issues. For example, the Office has been working with UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to analyse the issue of the consolidation of specialized protection functions in peace operations. The issue of maintaining an adequate presence of child protection advisers in United Nations peace operations has also been an important focus during the period. Much effort has been exerted by the Special Representative and her Office to ensure that a critical level of child protection staff is maintained in the face of budget constraints. Upholding this capacity is vitally important to continue protecting children's rights through mainstreaming child protection, conducting dialogue on action plans, releasing and reintegrating children and for monitoring and reporting.

V. Recommendations

57. **The Special Representative expresses her concern in relation to the increased use of besiegement as a tactic of war, reminds all parties to conflict of their obligations under international law regarding the provision of assistance to the civilian population and implores them to depoliticize the delivery of humanitarian aid to children. Specifically, clear orders should be disseminated among the rank and file to specify that humanitarian assistance for children should be facilitated in all circumstances. She urges the Human Rights Council to reinforce those messages in its work and for commissions of inquiry and other mechanisms to focus on this grave violation in their work.**

58. **The Special Representative urges the Human Rights Council to focus on the issue of grave violations, trafficking and human sale in resolutions and urges it to promote the non-criminalization of all child victims. She also encourages the Council to prioritize the provision of support services for children who have been subject to violations and abuse in situations of armed conflict.**

59. **The Special Representative urges Member States and regional and subregional organizations to support her Office and other child protection actors to carry out lessons-learned initiatives in order to compile comprehensive best practices on the children and armed conflict mandate. Those best practices will be essential in discussions with parties to conflict, including on reducing the impact of the conduct of hostilities on the rights of children.**

60. **The Special Representative welcomes the leadership and contribution of regional and subregional organizations in the protection of children. She calls upon all such organizations to work closely with her Office to enhance legal protection frameworks and facilitate the better integration of child protection considerations into their policies, operational planning and training of personnel.**

61. **Recalling that the issue of the reintegration of children is crucial to ensuring long-term peace, security and sustainable development, the Special Representative**

encourages the Member States concerned to take appropriate measures, including through supporting the relevant child protection actors, to reintegrate those children who have been associated with armed groups, paying special attention to the needs of girls. She also calls upon all Member States to provide the necessary political, technical and financial support for reintegration programmes.

62. **The Special Representative welcomes the continued attention to both progress and challenges regarding the impact of armed conflict on children in the reports of States parties to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee, as well as in the concluding observations of both committees. In that regard, all relevant Member States are urged to include, as appropriate, specific references to information on grave violations against children, on gaps in their applicable legal and policy frameworks and on accountability initiatives, in their own submissions to those bodies.**

63. **Relevant United Nations entities are also encouraged to use the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee as advocacy tools to promote States party follow-up to and implementation of recommendations related to children and armed conflict.**

64. **The Special Representative urges members of the Human Rights Council to emphasize the importance of the deployment of dedicated child protection capacity in situations of armed conflict, in order to mainstream child protection, conduct dialogue on action plans, support the release and reintegration of children and for monitoring and reporting. The Special Representative stresses that the need for such child protection capacity, including the budget required, should be systematically assessed during the preparation of peacekeeping operations and political missions.**

65. **The Special Representative notes the need to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to her Office and its partners to enable an increased focus on mandated tasks, such as awareness-raising, lessons learned, best practices and proactive engagement with regional and subregional organizations.**

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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Human Rights Council the annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais.

In her report, the Special Representative provides an overview of major initiatives and developments at the global, regional and national levels aimed at sustaining and scaling up efforts to safeguard children's right to freedom from violence. The report is intended to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its distinct target to end all forms of violence against children. The Special Representative pays special attention to investment in early childhood to prevent violence against children.

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Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

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I. Introduction

1. In the present report, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children reviews the key developments promoted at the global, regional and national levels, and gives an overview of the results achieved in safeguarding children's freedom from violence.

2. Guided by General Assembly resolution 62/141, in which the Assembly established the mandate, the Special Representative is a global, independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children.

3. At its seventy-second session, the General Assembly reaffirmed its support for the work of the Special Representative, recognizing the progress achieved and the consolidated partnerships promoted, and welcoming her efforts in mainstreaming the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children (A/61/299) in the international, regional and national agenda, including through regional and thematic consultations, field missions and studies addressing emerging concerns.

4. The United Nations study highlighted the extent and pervasiveness of violence in and its impact on children's lives. Thanks to the mobilization created by the study and the implementation of its recommendations, real progress has been made, and States are better equipped to prevent and respond to violence against children.

5. In the recent past, new partnerships and alliances have been formed; new international standards on children's protection from violence, including trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation have been adopted; a large number of States have developed a national comprehensive policy agenda on violence prevention and response, and have enacted legislation to prohibit physical, psychological and sexual violence and to support child victims; information campaigns have raised awareness of the negative impact of violence on child development and of positive practices that can prevent it; and new global initiatives are tackling bullying, domestic violence, sexual violence and harmful practices. More investment in also being made in research on the scale and nature of violence against children, and on effective strategies to prevent it, and to monitor progress towards its elimination.

6. Ten years after the publication of the United Nations study, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a unique opportunity to renew commitment and reinvigorate action to end violence against children. The implementation of the 2030Agenda, and its specific target 16.2 on ending all forms of violence against children and its other violence-related targets, can reduce the risk of violence in children's lives and provide effective responses for victims. Failing to reach these targets will compromise millions of childhoods and threaten potential gains made in many other targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially those relating to education, health, gender equality, poverty eradication, social inclusion and justice for all.

7. Prevention is indeed critical, given that violence compromises children's rights and undermines social progress. Violence goes hand in hand with deprivation and cycles of vulnerability, the high risk of poor health, poor school performance and long-term welfare dependency. In early childhood, the impact of violence is often irreversible. As children grow, their exposure to violence becomes part of a continuum, spreading across their life cycle and at times persisting through generations. Moreover, violence is associated with far-reaching costs for society. It diverts billions of dollars from social spending, slowing economic development and eroding States' human and social capital. The global costs of violence against children are estimated to be as high as $7 trillion a year.

8. The widespread exposure of children to violence is well documented in United Nations reports, academic research and children's own heart-breaking stories. In a recent

report,[1] the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)presented the most current data on violent discipline and exposure to domestic abuse during early childhood, violence at school, violent deaths among adolescents, and sexual violence in childhood and adolescence.

9. The data provided by UNICEF revealed alarming levels of violence affecting very young children and the ways that millions endure violence throughout childhood, often at the hands of people they know and trust. The report renews the call made in United Nations study for national plans and strategies to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children. This has been a priority for the Special Representative, and has gained renewed relevance in advancing progress towards the violence-related targets of the 2030 Agenda.

10. Another report, *Ending Violence in Childhood*, by the international learning initiative Know Violence in Childhood, provided a critical review of research and data from across regions. The information contained in the report can stimulate action to help to ensure that all children grow up free from violence and enjoy the opportunity to develop to their full potential.

11. The Special Representative continued to support United Nations policy developments aimed at the elimination of all forms of violence against children and accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. These included the IV Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour, in Buenos Aires, from 14 to 16 November 2017; the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the appraisal of the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons, on 27 and 28 September 2017; and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Symposium on School Violence and Bullying: From Evidence to Action, in Seoul, from 17 to 19 January 2017.

12. According to estimates, there are 152 million boys and girls in child labour, including 73 million engaged in its worst forms. Four million children continue to be subjected to forced labour. Moreover, the unprecedented scale of migration and forced displacement across the globe has increased the number of children at risk of economic exploitation. Participants in the IV Global Conference highlighted their concern that the rate of reduction in child labour was slowing, and identified critical actions to accelerate efforts to end child labour by 2025 and forced labour by 2030, and to generate employment opportunities for young people around the world.

13. The political declaration adopted at the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on trafficking reaffirmed States' commitment to the Global Plan of Action, and addressed the social, economic, cultural and political factors that make people vulnerable to trafficking, including the culture of tolerance of violence against children. It recognized victims as agents of change in the global fight against trafficking in persons, and encouraged the incorporation of their perspectives and experience in all efforts to prevent and combat it.

14. The International Symposium on School Violence and Bullying was held to support implementation of the recommendations made in the report of the Secretary-General on protecting children from bullying (A/71/213). Organized by UNESCO and the Ewha Womans University, it brought together United Nations agencies, Governments, members of civil society, academia and young people. A multi-stakeholder platform for data and research was launched at the Symposium to address the prevalence of bullying and school violence, and to gather evidence on effective interventions.

[1] UNICEF, *A familiar face: violence in the lives of children and adolescents* (New York, 2017).

15. The urgent need to protect children from violence has not diminished. Every five minutes a child dies as a consequence of violence. Every year, at least one billion children – half of the world's children – are affected by violence. They are intentionally targeted in politically driven processes, manipulated by organized crime, forced to flee violence in their communities, sold and exploited for economic gain, groomed online, disciplined by violent means, sexually assaulted in the privacy of their homes, neglected in institutions, abused in detention centres, bullied in schools, and stigmatized and tortured as a result of superstitious beliefs or harmful practices.

16. In some communities, children are abused as scapegoats for family or community misfortune and illness. They suffer stigma, violent punishment and ritual killings, if accused or perceived as witches, or in certain cases when their parents have been accused of witchcraft. Being branded a witch is a form of psychological violence, and the associated stigmatization and exclusion may lead to killing, mutilation or other serious forms of violence that are tantamount to torture.

17. Violence associated with accusations of witchcraft is largely underreported and concealed because of fear or social pressure. The most vulnerable and socially excluded children, such as children with albinism, children with disabilities, orphans, prematurely born children, especially gifted children or those who are simply deemed to be "different", are often most at risk.

18. To strengthen children's protection from violence associated with witchcraft beliefs, the Special Representative co-organized an international workshop with the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, in cooperation with the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network and Lancaster University, and the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, and the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities. The workshop was held on 21 and 22 September 2017.

19. Government, United Nations, academic and civil society partners shared the latest research and experiences, highlighting good practices, identifying gaps in legislation and policies, and stressing the need for multi-stakeholder action to prevent and address witchcraft-related violence, to ensure the recovery and safe reintegration of victims, and to fight impunity.

20. The Special Representative will continue to collaborate with partners for the abandonment of these practices.

II. Accelerating progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda towards the elimination of all forms of violence against children

21. Realizing every child's right to freedom from violence is a fundamental dimension of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United Nations study identified critical steps to make this right a reality for all children. The 2030 Agenda envisions a world where every child can grow up free from violence, abuse and exploitation.

22. The 2030 Agenda seeks to transform the world, leaving no one behind. The best way to avoid leaving children behind is to put them first in all policy decisions. A society that fails to do so risks arriving last in the quest for sustainable peace, justice and social progress. In 2016, the Office of the Special Representative, with many partners, launched the High Time to End Violence against Children initiative to help make the vision of the 2030 Agenda a reality for all children. The initiative promotes the active engagement of

leaders and citizens from all walks of life in creating and widening circles of non-violence around children's lives.

23. In October 2017, as part of the High Time initiative, the Office of the Special Representative launched *Celebrating Childhood: A journey to end violence against children*, a book that shares inspiring testimonies by remarkable child rights defenders of all ages and backgrounds who stand up for children's protection from violence. It is a call to action to transform the continuum of violence surrounding children's lives into a continuum of protection of their rights.

24. *Celebrating Childhood* includes the compelling voices of young people. The 2030 Agenda recognizes children as critical agents of change who channel their infinite capacities for the creation of a better, more inclusive world.

A. Children as agents of change

25. The inclusion of children's voices and experiences is critical to realizing the vision of the 2030 Agenda of a world free from fear and violence, and partnering with children is a crucial dimension of the Special Representative's mandate. The United Nations study was the first United Nations report drafted in collaboration with children and young people. Their involvement remains crucial to the implementation of its recommendations, including in advocacy, expert discussions and the development of thematic reports.

26. Violence is a priority concern for children. This was a key message from the more than 800,000 young participants in consultations that informed the development of the 2030 Agenda, and was reconfirmed by an online opinion poll on migrant and refugee children conducted by the Special Representative in collaboration with UNICEF. Of the more than 170,000 young people surveyed, a large percentage saw violence as a serious phenomenon associated with children's cross-border movements. Indeed, violence was identified as a key reason for children's decision to leave their country, one of the most serious challenges faced during their journey, and an ongoing problem upon arrival in the destination country.

27. Violence, fear and insecurity were also among the deepest concerns expressed by children affected by detention situations. As a contribution to the development of the global study on children deprived of liberty,[2] the Special Representative, together with partners in Latin America, undertook consultations and organized focus groups with children whose parents are in detention.

28. Children whose parents are in detention may be required to travel for long hours or days to spend just a few minutes with an incarcerated parent. They often have to meet in overcrowded and unfriendly places, under the scrutiny of security guards, enduring body searches and condescending looks. Children express their concern at personnel in detention centres who lack the skills to deal with young people or to treat them with respect.

29. The life of these children is characterized by marginalization, ostracism and a sense of hopelessness. They tend to come from families in situations of vulnerability and exclusion, are exposed to domestic violence, and have limited access to social services. They feel rejected, avoided and feared by other children and their families. They often face bullying in schools because a parent is in prison, and sometimes feel treated as if they were the delinquent.

30. Economic hardship caused by incarceration puts an additional burden on the household. Children may feel pressed to take on additional responsibilities to support the

[2] See General Assembly resolution 69/157, para. 52 (*d*).

family, at times trying to earn an income in dangerous places and activities, where they are at risk of additional harm.

31. The lack of a nurturing environment, the need to work, the absence of social protection and the weak capacity of the education system to accommodate and support children with a parent deprived of liberty may all lead to learning difficulties, absenteeism and eventual drop-out from school.

32. Children nonetheless do not lose hope and, especially those who are younger, are resilient and remain positive about their future. They also convey important recommendations for action. They appreciate being able to visit and maintain a bond with their detained parents, even if entering a prison is often a traumatic experience. They want better quality and longer visit times with more humane and dignified treatment. They call for safe spaces for dialogue with their parents in detention, and for safe and supportive environments where they can talk about this secret aspect of their life.

33. The children in the focus groups stressed the need for measures to prevent and address violence whenever it is committed, including an urgent change to arrest and search procedures. The arrest of a family member can be a brutal experience; it is no surprise that children believe that the police should in no case be allowed to enter a house and beat parents in front of a child.

34. Moreover, children call for psychosocial and financial support for children and their families, and for a welcoming and protective education system for the children affected.

B. Strengthening partnerships to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

35. To accelerate progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Special Representative promotes engagement with United Nations partners, national Governments, regional organizations, civil society, faith-based organizations, the private sector, the media and child-led networks. Strategic partnerships include the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, Alliance 8.7 (Global Alliance to Eradicate Forced Labour, Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour), the Global Youth Partnership for the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Promoting Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies.

36. Partnering with faith-based organizations is a priority for the Special Representative. Religious leaders are important allies in the promotion of the recommendations made in the United Nations study, helping to foster dialogue and to promote change in practices that perpetuate violence against children, and encouraging the use of non-violent forms of discipline within places of worship and religious communities at large. As Pope Francis highlighted on Universal Children's Day and during the audience he gave to the Special Representative in March 2017, the international community should be vigilant in protecting children from violence and ensuring that every girl and boy grows up in serenity and with confidence in their future.

37. The fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children, held in May 2017, in Panama City, placed these concerns at the heart of its agenda. The Forum brought together more than 500 leaders of the world's faith and spiritual traditions to increase understanding of the scale of violence against children and its impact on them, to identify ways religious leaders could help to tackle it, and to enhance the commitment of faith communities to prevent and reduce violence against children.

38. The Forum adopted the Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children, which reaffirms the moral imperative to protect children from harm and recognizes that no religious teaching or tradition justifies any form of violence against children.

39. In the Panama Declaration, participants expressed their resolve to support the 2030 Agenda and a clear commitment to raise awareness and promote action within faith communities to achieve the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals on ending violence against children. They also pledged to generate social and political will for legislation, policies and increased funding for children's protection programmes; and committed to listening to children with respect, educating religious and spiritual leaders and communities on the different forms of violence against children, and offering training in positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children to develop empathy and become more resilient.

C. Promoting follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda

40. Comprehensive and nationally owned sustainable development plans are being adopted by many Member States in view of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is essential these plans be supported by predictable resources and informed by solid evidence and robust, reliable and disaggregated data to assess progress towards the violence-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

41. Investment in children is crucial to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals, but there is still a long way to go. While half of those living in extreme poverty are children and half of the world's children are affected by violence every year, budget allocations for children's well-being are often inadequate. Furthermore, official development assistance (ODA) mobilized to end violence against children remains insufficient. As noted in a recent report,[3] the average ODA per child per year to address violence in low-income countries is less than $0.65, representing less than 0.6 per cent of total ODA.

42. The high-level political forum on sustainable development provides a strategic platform to ensure that children are placed at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. Through her participation in high-level intergovernmental meetings and cooperation with regional organizations and permanent missions, the Special Representative has drawn attention to the opportunity provided by the voluntary national reviews and the forum for States to share positive developments and lessons learned, and to identify persisting challenges and efforts to monitor children's exposure to violence.

43. The theme of the 2017 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development was "Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world", a topic of special relevance to ending violence against children. Violence perpetuates poverty, but poverty can also trigger violence and create conditions for abuse and exploitation to flourish. In marginalized communities where family incomes are low and livelihood opportunities are few, where housing is inadequate and there is limited access to quality social services, children are more likely to experience violence. They are also less likely to receive support to recover from trauma, to enjoy a future with skills, confidence and resilience, or to feel empowered to seek justice and end impunity.

[3] Childfund Alliance, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages International, World Vision, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children and UNICEF, *Counting pennies: A review of official development assistance to end violence against children*, May 2017.

44. Poverty and violence are intertwined. In 2017, several voluntary reviews yielded powerful examples of how strengthened social protection can mitigate the increased risks of violence for children living in poverty. To highlight significant national experiences and the need for coherent cross-sectoral action for prevention and response, the Special Representative co-hosted a side event to the meeting of the high-level political forum with UNICEF and the Governments of Chile, Indonesia and Sweden.

45. The 2017 ministerial declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development gave greater visibility to children, including their right to freedom from violence. It stressed the need to invest in children to address multidimensional deprivations and to empower them to help build a more prosperous future. In the declaration, signatories committed to supporting children's participation in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against them.

46. The theme for the 2018 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development will be "Building resilient societies and cities". Special attention will be paid to Sustainable Development Goal 11 calling for cities and human settlements to be inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

47. Half of the world's population lives in cities, and half of that population are children. Increasing urbanization, combined with high levels of economic inequality and endemic poverty, make the risk of urban violence particularly acute. As the Special Representative highlighted in a recent thematic study,[4] building schools and urban spaces that are safe for children, supporting families and engaging with local authorities, investing in public safety measures and ensuring access to justice can help to mitigate the risks of violence faced by children in cities.

48. The high-level political forum in 2018 will provide an opportunity to reflect on national implementation of the New Urban Agenda[5] and support the leadership of mayors and local authorities promoting visionary city plans guided by the best interests of the child and the active participation of children.

49. To raise awareness of the New Urban Agenda among young people and to promote the inclusion of children's views and experiences of urban life in the planning of safe and sustainable cities, the Special Representative issued a child-friendly publication[6] in which she calls for the creation of urban spaces where children may enjoy their rights, feel included, safe and protected from violence, and where their voices are duly considered.

50. In 2019, the General Assembly will host its first review of the 2030 Agenda.[7] Under the theme "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality", the Assembly will address Sustainable Development Goal 16, including target 16.2, on ending all forms of violence against children. The thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child will also fall in 2019. The occurrence of these two events in the same year presents a unique opportunity to further mobilize global action in violence prevention and response through a thematic review by the high-level political forum focusing on children and progress towards target 16.2 and the other violence-related Goal targets.

[4] *Protecting children affected by armed violence in the community* (New York, 2016).

[5] See General Assembly resolution 71/256, annex.

[6] *The cities of our dreams: A safe and child friendly New Urban Agenda*, September 2016.

[7] See General Assembly resolution 70/299.

III. Mainstreaming children's protection from violence in the national policy agenda

51. The Special Representative continued to give support to the consolidation of national implementation efforts, including through country visits to Barbados, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Greece, Indonesia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Panama and Thailand.

52. During her second visit to Cambodia, the Special Representative participated in the launch of the Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence against Children 2017-2021.[8] The Plan was informed by the findings of a household survey on violence against children conducted in 2014, the first in the region. The survey found that children experienced and witnessed violence in their public and private lives, at home, at school, in their communities and online.

53. Adolescents and young people played a significant role in the creation of the Action Plan through their active participation in discussions and policy dialogues across the country, and their views and experiences will remain critical in its implementation. Civil society organizations were also actively involved and continue to play an indispensable role in supporting the strengthening of the child protection system in Cambodia.

54. Important measures are being taken to prevent violence against children and to improve services for victims. These measures include a positive parenting strategic plan, teacher-training modules in the use of non-violent methods of discipline, a handbook for training health professionals, an action plan to reduce by 30 per cent the number of children in residential care, and a new juvenile justice law that promotes diversion and the prevention of the deprivation of liberty of children.

55. Mexico launched its own national plan of action to end violence against children.[9] The plan was developed through a wide participatory process and is aligned with the 2030 Agenda. It identifies critical priority actions, including legislative reforms to prohibit all forms of violence against children and address situations of child marriage. It also envisages the promotion of a national campaign on violence against children; investment in online safety; enhanced mechanisms of counselling, complaint and reporting on incidents of violence; the strengthening of coordination of actions; and support for children's participation. The Plan includes an important assessment of children's exposure to violence, as well as of children's views and recommendations.

56. Paraguay adopted a national plan for the protection of children against abuse and all forms of violence.[10] The plan is framed by the 2030 Agenda, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recommendations made in the United Nations study. It is the result of interdepartmental cooperation and a participatory process. Its implementation is overseen by the National Commission for the Prevention and Response to Violence against Children. Children and adolescents were key informants in the development of the plan, and remain critical actors in its implementation, including by raising awareness of the various manifestations of violence and mechanisms for reporting violent incidents, promoting information about the plan among peers and families, and supporting advocacy efforts in municipalities and communities.

[8] Available at www.unicef.org/cambodia/Full_VAC_Action_Plan_En_Final_AP.pdf.

[9] See www.unicef.org/mexico/spanish/PLAN_ACCION_FINAL.pdf.

[10] See www.snna.gov.py/archivos/documentos/Plan%20de%20Accion%20Pais_r1v7aq8u.pdf.

57. The United Republic of Tanzania launched its own national plan of action to end violence against women and children (2017-2022).[11] Guided by the 2030 Agenda, the plan builds upon the findings of a household survey on violence against children conducted in 2009, and recognizes the positive impact of investment in the prevention of violence on inclusive growth. It provides a strategic framework for mobilizing action and resources to achieve the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular target 16.2.

58. France adopted a new inter-ministerial plan of action to combat violence against children (2017-2019).[12] The plan aims to support families in their child-rearing responsibilities; to promote positive parenting practices; to break the invisibility of violence against children; to promote the early detection and reporting of incidents; and to strengthen services to assist victims.

59. Support for legislative measures to address violence against children remained a high priority for the Special Representative. Since 2006, the number of countries with a comprehensive legal ban has more than tripled, reaching more than 50 in 2017, including most recently Benin, Ireland, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lithuania, Mongolia, Paraguay, Peru, Slovenia and Viet Nam.

60. Further legislative measures were adopted to consolidate the normative foundation of children's protection from violence. In Sweden, incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into national legislation is being pursued to ensure that its provisions are respected fully in all decisions affecting children.

61. In Malaysia, the Sexual Offences against Children Bill, adopted in 2017, strengthened the protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation. The Bill criminalizes the grooming of children, promotes their protection from online abuse and recognizes them as competent witnesses in cases of sexual crimes.

62. In Chile, a new law (No. 21.013)[13] criminalizes the physical or psychological maltreatment of children or of any person with disabilities. Sanctions include barring offenders from employment in the education or health sectors, or from other positions that may involve a direct relationship with the victim.

63. Brazil adopted a new law (No. 13.431) to safeguard the rights of child victims and witnesses of violence.[14] The law requires all levels of government to develop comprehensive and coordinated policies to secure children's right to freedom from violence in all settings, including the home. It recognizes children's rights to have access to information and legal representation; to participate in decisions and to benefit from relevant support services; and to protection from re-victimization and to reparation. It establishes accessible, safe, confidential and child-friendly reporting, counselling and complaint mechanisms for children, and recognizes their right to be listened to by trained professionals. It also recognizes the duty of any person who witnesses or knows of any act of physical, psychological or sexual violence committed against a child in a private or public setting to report it immediately to relevant authorities, who should then bring it to the attention of the public prosecutor.

64. In South Africa, the High Court declared the common-law defence of "reasonable or moderate chastisement" unconstitutional. In Jamaica, the Prime Minister announced in Parliament his strong commitment to achieving a full legal ban on all forms of violence, including within the home.

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[11] See http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/2016/NPA-VAWC%20%20Tanzania.pdf.

[12] See www.memoiretraumatique.org/assets/files/v1/Documents-pdf/2017-1er_Plan_VIOLENCES_ENFANTS_VF.pdf.

[13] See www.leychile.cl/Navegar?idNorma=1103697.

[14] See www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/lei/2017/lei-13431-4-abril-2017-784569-norma-pl.html.

65. Significant steps were also taken by El Salvador, Honduras, and Trinidad and Tobago to raise the minimum age for marriage to 18 years. In 2017, important progress was made in legislation aimed at ending impunity for sexual offences against children, including the repeal by Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia of legal provisions allowing rapists to avoid criminal prosecution by marrying their victims.

66. The 2030 Agenda attaches significant importance to the availability of quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data to inform decision-making and to assess progress. Important data developments on violence against children include an agreed global indicator framework and data collection initiatives promoted by United Nations agencies.

67. National household surveys in Asia and Africa, including in Cambodia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Philippines and Zimbabwe have helped to fill data gaps. In Latin America, many States are undertaking surveys to document the magnitude, nature and impact of violence in childhood. In Honduras, the survey features an innovative module on migration and violence.

68. The above-mentioned surveys have cast light on the hidden reality of violence in children's lives and helped to shape evidence-based national plans of action to address priority concerns. This has been critical to promote better cross-sectoral coordination at distinct levels of administration, and to involve a wide range of stakeholders, including academia, civil society, religious leaders and the private sector, and children themselves.

69. Surveys have also given greater visibility to pressing areas of concern. In the Philippines, the national survey disaggregated data by gender to assess the different risks of sexual abuse faced by boys and girls, to help to inform gender-sensitive advocacy, prevention and responses strategies, and to provide appropriate services to victims.

70. The survey also revealed the serious risk of children's exposure to online abuse; a follow-up study confirmed its high incidence. Online abuse is facilitated by increased Internet connectivity, the availability of cheap devices to access cyberspace, the widespread knowledge of English, which allows communication by perpetrators abroad, convenient payment mechanisms through the network of remittance services, and a culture of silence and of deference to elders who may be colluding in abuse.

71. The value of research was also highlighted in Ecuador, where a study was conducted on children's exposure to bullying, building upon the Special Representative's advocacy on this topic. Follow-up to the study has led to important initiatives, including the establishment of nationwide students' counselling units; capacity-building programmes for teachers, parents and school personnel; and the development of protocols to report incidents of violence in schools. A national plan of action on bullying is now under preparation.

IV. Reinforcing regional processes in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

72. Cooperation with regional organizations and institutions is a key element of the Special Representative's strategy to accelerate progress in children's protection from violence. Regional organizations and institutions are strategic allies, and their cooperation with the Special Representative has helped to place violence against children at the centre of the regional policy agenda, while enhancing the accountability of States and supporting national implementation efforts.

73. The Special Representative has hosted high-level consultations in the South and Central American, Caribbean, South Asian, Pacific, European and Arab regions with

regional partners. Six regional monitoring reports have been issued, and periodic review meetings held to sustain and accelerate progress.

74. As a result, regional political commitments and implementation road maps have been adopted (see A/HRC/19/64), and a new generation of regional plans on violence against children is being developed, aligned with the 2030 Agenda. In turn, these efforts have translated into the strengthening of national legislation and public policies, the consolidation of data and research, and the promotion of public campaigns.

75. To promote this process further, the Special Representative organizes an annual, high-level cross-regional round table with regional organizations and institutions. This forum has become a strategic mechanism within the United Nations system to engage in policy dialogue, to share knowledge and good practices, to identify trends and pressing challenges, and to join forces to strengthen children's protection.

76. In June 2017, the Special Representative co-hosted the seventh annual cross-regional round table with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The round table was devoted to placing children at the heart of the 2030 Agenda and to addressing the role of regional organizations in accelerating progress towards the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals on children's protection from violence.

77. Guided by the theme of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, representatives from regional organizations shared experiences and good practices addressing the multifaceted nature of deprivation, and violence against children. Notable initiatives included promoting access to universal, inclusive and child-sensitive basic social services of quality; cross-sectoral cooperation and integrated services in violence prevention; investing in early childhood care; ensuring effective family support and social protection measures; and promoting the social inclusion of those left behind.

78. Participants reaffirmed their commitment to use the opportunity provided by the high-level political forum and the development of voluntary national reviews to accelerate progress towards the elimination of all forms of violence against children. They highlighted the importance of mobilizing adequate national resources and ODA to support violence prevention and response initiatives, and of strengthening data systems to inform decisions and monitor and sustain progress.

79. Participants also recognized the critical role of children as agents of change, and the importance of undertaking action informed by children's views and experiences. In this spirit, an ASEAN Children's Forum was held alongside the meeting, creating an opportunity for a strategic engagement with young people from the region. These discussions placed a special emphasis on children's empowerment and participation to prevent and address incidents of violence, and on the risks associated with bullying and online abuse.

80. Young participants also emphasized the importance of enjoying a loving and supportive environment, and called for awareness-raising and information-sharing initiatives to enable young people to become empowered citizens, to identify risks, to report incidents and to seek help from child-sensitive services. They called for urgent government action, including effective laws, policies and budgets; good parenting and early childhood development initiatives; training for professionals working with children; and genuine opportunities and platforms for open discussions with young people. As children highlighted, "everyone has a role to play, and if we are willing to end violence against children, we can make the world a better place!"

81. In 2018, the Special Representative will co-host the cross-regional meeting with the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (see para. 75 above), an intergovernmental body of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

82. Significant developments continue to be pursued in South Asia to further strengthen children's protection from violence, including the implementation of a regional plan of action for the prevention and elimination of child labour for 2016-2021, the development of a regional strategy to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and the promotion of online safety. Implementation of the regional action plan on child marriage (2015-2018) was pursued in 2017 with the launch in Afghanistan of a national plan of action to eliminate early and child marriage, while in India, Rajasthan became the first State to launch a strategic plan of action for the prevention of child marriage.

83. To further strengthen children's protection from violence across Africa, the Special Representative continued to pursue engagement with the African Union and subregional organizations, as well as with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the African Union Special Rapporteur on Ending Child Marriage.

84. The vision of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and of Africa's Agenda for Children 2040, which was adopted by the African Committee, is aligned with the 2030 Agenda. Africa's Agenda for Children 2040[15] contains measurable goals and priority areas that the African Union and its Member States commit to reach by 2040, in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2 on ending all forms of violence against children.

85. The Day of the African Child in 2017 was devoted to the 2030 Agenda and to efforts made to accelerate protection, empowerment and equal opportunity for all children. Recognizing violence as one of the major barriers to sustainable development, the discussions held on the Day placed special emphasis on ensuring progress towards Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2.

86. Building on commitments to promote an Africa fit for its children, the Special Representative continued to support the strengthening of child protection initiatives in East and West Africa.

87. In October 2017, Ministers responsible for the care and protection of children across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) gathered in Niamey to adopt the Strategic Framework for Strengthening National Child Protection Systems to Prevent and Respond to Violence, Abuse and Exploitation against Children in West Africa. In December, the Framework was approved by the Heads of State, signalling highest level commitment to end violence against children.

88. The Framework recognizes the importance of dialogue and review at the regional and subregional levels to boost cooperation and partnerships. It also allows for the identification of overall trends, lessons learned, good practices and implementation gaps, while enhancing the accountability of ECOWAS in monitoring, implementation and reporting.

89. The Framework aims to reduce children's vulnerability, to build resilience and to ensure their protection from violence, abuse and exploitation. On the basis of an analysis of data in the region, it highlights five priority areas: sexual, physical, and emotional violence; child marriage; children on the move; child labour; and civil registration, vital statistics and birth registration.

90. The East African Community met in Kigali to promote progress in combating violence against children. Building on work adopted by its Council of Ministers, including policies and standards to facilitate national action, Community members promoted the development of a regional framework for strengthening national child protection systems and community mechanisms.

[15] See www.acerwc.org/ourevents/africas-agenda-for-children-2040/.

91. This important regional framework supports approaches to strengthen national systems on violence prevention and response, to address cross-border issues, to enable intercountry comparability, and to foster the exchange of good practices and lessons learned.

92. The ECOWAS and East African Community regional frameworks demonstrate the political will of Member States to uphold children's right to freedom from violence, while helping to reinforce implementation efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the goals of Agenda 2063 and Africa's Agenda for Children 2040.

93. The Special Representative continued to promote efforts to advance the implementation of the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, and noteworthy progress has been made. In June 2017, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union devoted an open session to ending child marriage in Africa. The Council underlined the need for Member States to criminalize child marriage, with a view to deterring it, while ensuring the provision of appropriate mechanisms for psychosocial support and reproductive health services for victims of violence.

94. Child marriage was also given special consideration at a high-level meeting held in October 2017, in Dakar, on ending child marriage in West and Central Africa held. Examining the drivers of child marriage and sharing experiences from across the region, the meeting helped to maintain momentum of the Campaign to End Child Marriage.

95. African countries continued to invest in the strengthening of their national child protection systems and to conduct comprehensive household surveys to document the magnitude, nature and impact of violence in childhood.

96. Malawi, Nigeria, Swaziland, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia completed national household surveys on violence against children, and are in various stages of implementing comprehensive national policy agendas in response to the findings made. Botswana, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe completed surveys, and will launch their results in 2018, while Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique and Namibia are planning similar processes.

97. Important initiatives helped to further consolidate evidence on child protection from violence in Africa. One report[16] showed that children in care across Africa, already made vulnerable by the circumstances that led to their separation from their families, continue to be at high risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Informed by a regional expert consultation held in Nairobi and supported by the Special Representative, the report addresses the links between alternative care reform efforts and violence prevention initiatives. It stresses that, although stable and secure families provide strong protection environments for children, there is an increased risk of neglect, abuse and exploitation when positive family care is lacking and bonding and protective relationships are weak.

98. The report provides an in-depth analysis of legal and policy developments, data collection efforts, service delivery and public awareness to ensure that families can be better supported to provide stable and appropriate care for children. It calls for increased investment in violence prevention and in support for families to ensure a stable and nurturing home environment. It also calls for the provision of family- and community-based alternatives to avoid the placement of children in institutions. For children who may end up in care, it calls for effective safeguarding measures for their protection and a prohibition of the placement of young children, especially children under three years of age, in residential care.

[16] Better Care Network, *Violence against Children and Care in Africa: A Discussion Paper* (New York, 2017).

99. Since the adoption in 2015 of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children, the Special Representative has continued to promote actively its implementation in collaboration with the ASEAN secretariat, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, and ASEAN States members.

100. The Regional Plan, which is framed by the 2030 Agenda, provides a powerful example of how regional cooperation can support national action to protect children from violence and to advance progress to achieve the violence-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. It proposes concrete actions within a realistic time frame, including the promotion of non-violent approaches to child discipline; the deinstitutionalization of children; the protection of children from online abuse; the promotion of child-friendly justice proceedings; the prevention of deprivation of liberty of children; the promotion of alternatives to detention; and awareness-raising campaigns to break the invisibility of violence and to secure the protection of child victims.

101. To sustain progress in implementation of the Regional Plan and to support a mid-term review, UNICEF developed an important baseline study in collaboration with ASEAN States Members and representatives of the Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children in 2017. The study acknowledges the initiatives under way, provides positive practices and lessons learned, and identifies gaps and opportunities for accelerating progress in the priority areas of the Plan.

102. The ASEAN Guidelines for a Non-Violent Approach to Nurture, Care and Development of Children in All Settings are an important initiative highlighted by the baseline study. The Guidelines promote children's development and well-being, and the elimination of violence in all settings, and address violence among children, including the risk of bullying, and physical, verbal and sexual abuse, including online abuse.

103. The Special Representative continued her cooperation with the Organization of American States. In September 2017, at its ninety-second session, in Barbados, the Inter-American Institute adopted a resolution on violence against children, in which it reaffirmed the commitment of Member States to promote violence prevention and elimination in all settings, in accordance with the 2030 Agenda. It also stressed the importance of sharing good practices and experiences, especially on children's protection from sexual exploitation and the minimum age of criminal responsibility, and called for greater use of alternatives to the deprivation of liberty of children.

104. Significant efforts have been made in the region to strengthen national child protection systems. An inter-American forum, the Foro Interamericano de Sistemas Nacionales de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, was held in April 2017 with the participation of national Governments, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and civil society partners to promote comprehensive protection systems. Participants in the Forum highlighted the persisting challenges that compromised the rights of vulnerable groups, including indigenous children, children with disabilities, those affected by migration and refugee situations, and children in early childhood. Recognizing the importance of sharing experiences between countries in the region, they called for better coordination across all levels of administration, supported by sound policies, institutions and funding; consolidated systems of monitoring and evaluation of public policies; the active engagement of local authorities and civil society organizations in implementation efforts; and the institutionalization of permanent platforms for the participation of children and adolescents.

105. In the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), guidelines for the promotion of positive discipline and the prevention of violence against children are being developed in accordance with the 2030 Agenda and its violence-related targets. The guidelines will help

to advance the implementation of regional commitments, including through the enactment and enforcement of laws banning all forms of violence against children. The guidelines also commit to the development of a regional plan for 2018-2023 on the promotion of positive discipline and violence prevention.

106. To advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, the Special Representative pursued further cooperation with local authorities in support of their efforts towards the prevention and elimination of violence against children. In September, at the meeting of the Committee on Childhood of the Ibero-American Union of Capital Cities, held in La Paz, local governments adopted a declaration in which they expressed their commitment to the promotion of child-friendly cities equipped with public services and spaces devoted to children's care and protection; the development of laws, policies and monitoring processes to advance and assess progress in early childhood; and to paying special attention to children on the move across the Ibero-American region.

107. The Special Representative continued her engagement with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) building upon her contribution to the debate on the rights of the child held by the OIC Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission in November 2016.

108. In its outcome document, the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission paid substantial attention to the measures that need to be taken by OIC States Members to strengthen children's protection from violence, in accordance with international legal obligations. It addressed the gender dimensions of violence against children and the importance of incorporating a gender perspective into all policies and actions. It also called upon Member States to promote the elimination of all forms of violence against children as a priority in their national development plans and national reviews within the framework of the 2030 Agenda. The Commission reiterated its call in its message for Universal Children's Day in November 2017, calling for concerted global action to eliminate all forms of violence against children and to secure their rights in a comprehensive manner, in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

109. The Special Representative pursued further her collaboration with the Council of Europe to strengthen children's freedom from violence across the region. These initiatives are framed by the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021), which was developed by the Council with the participation of the Special Representative. The Strategy supports national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and is monitored by the Ad Hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child, in which the Special Representative also participates.

110. Children's freedom from violence is one of the main pillars of the Strategy. During the first year of implementation, special attention was paid to children's online protection and the rights of migrant and refugee children.

111. In May 2017, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted the Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe 2017-2019, with three main pillars: ensuring access to rights and child-friendly procedures; providing effective protection; and enhancing the integration of arriving children. The implementation of the Action Plan will complement other important activities being undertaken by the Ad Hoc Committee, including the development of new standards on legal guardianship, and age assessment of migrant and refugee children.

112. The Ad Hoc Committee developed guidelines on the protection of the rights of the child in the digital environment and the prevention of online abuse to support States in the development of legislation and policies, and the promotion of national and international cooperation, and to ensure that business enterprises and other relevant actors meet their responsibilities. In support of this process, the Council also developed awareness-raising and educational resources, including a new *Internet Literacy Handbook*.

113. The Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) of the Council of Europe requires States parties to adopt legislative and other measures to prevent sexual violence, to protect child victims, and to prosecute offenders. Recognizing that information and communications technology presents risks of sexual abuse and exploitation of children, the Lanzarote Committee gave priority attention to this topic. The information gathered by the Committee will allow it to assess the implementation of the Convention by States parties and to identify good practices to support capacity-building at the national level.

114. In April, the Council of the European Union adopted a revised version of the Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child, reaffirming its commitment to the protection of the rights of the child globally. The Guidelines promote the mainstreaming of children's rights in European Union policy and action, and aim to strengthen efforts to ensure that children in the most marginalized and vulnerable situations are reached effectively. They promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2, and reaffirm support for the Special Representative's work, alongside that of other international and regional child rights actors. They also identify priority actions, including the development of national strategies and enhanced coordination between all levels of government to ensure effective implementation; the alignment of national legislation with international human rights standards; and the collection and use of data to inform advocacy, legal and policy reforms and the mobilization of resources.

115. In November, the Special Representative participated in the eleventh European Forum on the Rights of the Child, held in Brussels. The Forum brought together more than 300 experts from States members and institutions of the European Union, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Balkan States, and from civil society, international organizations, children's ombudspersons and academia. Young people affected by situations of deprivation of liberty also actively participated.

116. The Forum expressed support for the global study on children deprived of liberty.[17] Placing special emphasis on alternatives to detention, it addressed the situation of children in the criminal justice system, in immigration detention, in care or health institutions, and children whose parents are in prison. In her address to the Forum, the Special Representative presented the preliminary findings from the research undertaken by her office with strategic partners in Latin America on the experience of young people whose parents are in detention (see para. 27 above).

V. Violence prevention starts in early childhood

117. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the crucial role played by early childhood development in creating peaceful and prosperous societies. Target 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals specifically commits States to ensuring that all children have access to inclusive and quality early childhood education and care so that they may acquire the knowledge and skills to fulfil their potential, pursue opportunities and participate fully in society as productive citizens.

118. Investing in early childhood and ending violence in children's lives are first and foremost a question of children's rights. But the evidence continues to mount that it is also a highly cost-effective strategy leading to better health, education and social outcomes that

[17] See General Assembly resolution 69/157.

increase national wealth while reducing the social expenditures incurred in dealing with the long-term consequences of violence in childhood.

119. Early childhood is where violence prevention must begin and where investment can achieve a very high return.

120. A nurturing and caring environment helps to secure children's health, nutrition, early learning and sense of belonging. It promotes their self-esteem and improves their ability to handle stress and adversity. Scientific evidence shows that the human brain develops wider and faster during its first 1,000 days than at any other stage of life, and that it is during this crucial developmental period that the foundation for a person's future well-being is laid.

121. Early childhood is, however, still seen primarily as a period of transition towards adult life, and young children are perceived as "not-yet persons" or "people in the making". There is insufficient awareness of the negative impact that violence has on children's health and development, and of the social returns from investment in a violence-free early childhood.

122. Children are often exposed to violence early in life, and it is during infancy that it has its most devastating and long-lasting impact on a child's development, with consequences that persist into adulthood.

123. As highlighted by UNICEF, close to 300 million children experience psychological aggression and/or physical punishment by their caregivers at home. Six in ten children aged 12 to 23 months are subject to violent disciplinary practices, and almost half endure physical punishment. In certain countries, shouting, yelling or screaming are common forms of discipline for one-year-olds, and 176 million children under five years of age witness domestic violence.[18]

124. In its major 2016 series on early childhood, the *Lancet* estimated that 250 million children younger than five years of age in low and middle-income countries risked falling short of their potential because of the adversities that they faced in their early years.[19] Investing in the physical, cognitive, emotional and social capacities of these children is a key factor in their development.

125. Early childhood interventions may cost as little as $0.50 per child per year when combined with existing services. Lack of investment in early years may, however, hold children back before they reach school age, leading them to endure a lifetime of disadvantage. A poor start in life can lead to a loss of about a quarter of average adult income per year. In addition, countries may forfeit as much as two times their current expenditures of GDP on health and education.[20]

126. The vital importance for child development of a nurturing and caring environment with good health, sound nutrition and stimulation is well established. Promoting positive attachments with caregivers helps children to develop resilience in the face of adversity, while early childhood interventions protect children against stress, laying the foundation for learning at home and at school.

127. It is also a known fact that children subjected to violence, abuse and neglect in early childhood are more likely to display a range of pathologies in later life, including poor school performance and a greater probability of dropping out, anxiety and depression, ill health, risky behaviour, and self-harm.

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[18] UNICEF, *A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents* (UNICEF, New York, 2017).

[19] Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale, *Lancet*, October 2016.

[20] Ibid.

128. Longitudinal studies show that children exposed to maltreatment are more likely to be victims of violence later in life and to become perpetrators themselves. They are also at a greater risk of engaging in criminal behaviour, while showing a tendency to minimize the seriousness of criminal acts.

129. Advances in neuroscience are helping to piece together the complex mechanisms by which various forms of toxic stress in early childhood, including violence, translate into poor outcomes for children. While an infant's developing brain establishes the most efficient architecture for an individual's needs, it is also extremely sensitive to its surroundings.[21]

130. Research on the neuroscience of childhood maltreatment has documented the consequences of socioeconomic status as a stressor and the health-related consequences of exposure to verbal abuse. It has also examined the impact of different forms of maltreatment, such as bullying and cyberbullying, neglect, sexual violence and emotional abuse on early child development. The impact of growing up in institutions, particularly before two years of age, on long-term mental and physical health has also been examined.

131. Alterations to the brain following childhood maltreatment can lead to an increased risk of developing non-communicable diseases and mental health problems, short and long-term cognitive disabilities, deficits in social and emotional competencies, and an increased tendency to maladaptive behaviour.

132. Early childhood presents a unique window of opportunity to break the vicious cycle of violence and abuse through appropriate interventions. An increasing body of evidence points to three key dimensions of successful national strategies that contribute to this goal:

(a) Legal prohibition of all violence against children, including within the home;

(b) Implementation of policies to support families in their child-rearing responsibilities and to prevent child abandonment and placement in institutions;

(c) Promotion of integrated and cohesive actions by relevant sectors responsible for violence prevention and response.

133. Firstly, legislation sends an important message to society about practices that are acceptable or non-negotiable, helping to shape attitudes and behaviour. The protection of children in their early years begins with the enactment of a comprehensive legal ban on all forms of violence in all settings. Today, more than 50 States have adopted such an explicit legal prohibition on the use of violence as a form of discipline, correction or punishment, including in schools and the home.

134. Secondly, public policies are not neutral to children. Investment in young children provides an important entry point to strengthen families' nurturing and protective role, to prevent child abandonment and placement in alternative care, and to support children at risk of violence. Parenting skills programmes that go hand in hand with social protection interventions help to reduce the risk of social exclusion and deprivation, prevent family stress and tackle social norms that condone violent forms of child discipline.

135. Thirdly, violence is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be addressed only through a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach. Strong, effective cooperation is needed

[21] The interplay between the genetic endowment of a child and its environment leads to alterations in the way genes are expressed (the study of which is known as "epigenetics"), including in the neurophysiology, cognition and behaviour of the individual; for example, neglect or absence of loving care for infants can have epigenetic effects that impair the brain's stress regulation system and affect the child's ability to tolerate and manage stress in the future.

across sectors, including health, nutrition, education and social and child protection, to address the multiple risks faced by young children and their families.

136. Every child needs support in early childhood, but at-risk children from disadvantaged environments are least likely to receive it. Disadvantaged families are often strained to the limit and have fewer resources to invest in effective early childhood development; as a result, many at-risk children miss out on the growth that is the foundation for success in school, career and life.

137. The importance of strong political leadership in assuring the best start in life and the elimination of violence in early years cannot be overstated. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, has pointed out that "investing in early childhood education is a cost-effective strategy, even during a budget crisis," leading to better education, health, social and economic outcomes that increase revenue and reduce the need for costly social spending. "The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged [children and their] families."[22]

VI. Looking ahead

138. Freedom from violence and the right to live a dignified and happy life are promises the international community has pledged to safeguard for all children. It is high time to deliver on these promises. Guided by the human rights imperative of freeing children from violence, the evidence gathered in recent years of what works, children's inspiring participation, efforts and resilience, and the ambitious vision and historic opportunity offered by the 2030 Agenda, a quantum leap in violence against children prevention and response is possible. Together, we can build the world that children dream of and wish for: a world of non-violence and peace, where each and every child is cherished, respected and protected. A world in which no child is left behind.

139. For countless millions of children, however, this dream remains distant and illusory. Daily life is endured in fear and pain, surrounded by appalling levels of neglect, abuse and exploitation – in their homes, schools, neighbourhoods, in institutions aimed at their care and protection and in cyberspace. Children are too frightened to speak up; they are uncertain about the support they can receive, and lack information to seek advice and protection in their healing, recovery and reintegration.

140. Violence is widespread, hidden and concealed; but it is not a fate. With the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, children's freedom from violence can be placed at the heart of the policy agenda of every nation, helping reduce the risk of violence in children's lives and providing effective response to child victims.

141. The success of the 2030 Agenda will be measured by the actions taken and the tangible, positive difference made in the lives of children, especially for those furthest behind who are often the most at risk of violence.

142. The Special Representative remains deeply committed to mobilizing increased support to the strengthening of children's protection from violence and advancing progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. With this aim, in 2018 she will provide special attention to the following:

[22] See James J. Heckman, *Invest in early childhood development: Reduce deficits, strengthen the economy*, The Heckman Equation, 2012.

(a) Supporting national efforts to reach the violence-related Sustainable Development Goals by mainstreaming children's protection from violence into the national policy agenda, furthering the enactment and enforcement of legislation banning all forms of violence and the further consolidation of data and research, and promoting the inclusion in voluntary national reviews and the high-level political forum on sustainable development of positive experiences, lessons learned and commitments to overcome persisting challenges and to assess progress in children's exposure to violence; in this regard, the theme of the high-level political forum in 2018 of "Building resilient societies and cities" will be a strategic opportunity to promote safe urban spaces for all children, guided by the best interests of the child and informed by children's views and experiences;

(b) Advocating for early childhood development initiatives to enhance violence prevention and break the cycle of violence in children's lives. Good quality services in early childhood help to improve the life chances of the most vulnerable children and to enhance nations' human capital; to support progress in this area, the Special Representative will prepare a thematic report on early child development and the prevention of violence against children;

(c) Safeguarding the rights of migrant and refugee children in the global compacts for migration and refugees, and promoting a continuum of protection to prevent and respond to the risks to which these children are subject throughout their perilous journeys, where fear and insecurity are their constant companions. The Special Representative will prepare a thematic report to document and promote action to prevent the serious forms of violence that these children encounter;

(d) Further consolidating children's protection from school violence, bullying and cyberbullying, including by giving support to the follow-up report of the Secretary-General on protecting children from bullying, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 71/176. Bullying, a top priority concern for children, is often part of a continuum from the schoolyard to the neighbourhood and increasingly found in cyberspace. Strong political will and steady action can, however, prevent and address it, building upon the good practices and experiences that the Secretary-General, in his report, will help to gather and promote.

143. Although emerging from the depths of the worst nightmares imaginable, child victims of violence remain resilient, generous and forward-looking. Across regions, young advocates join hands with national authorities, civil society and many other allies in raising awareness about the detrimental impact of violence, empowering children to be the first line of protection from abuse and exploitation and inspiring others to build a world where children can grow up free from fear and violence, where their hopes and dreams can be realized.

144. Even in the most desperate of situations, children reveal hope for a better world and prove their determination to achieve lasting change. We must not disappoint them. Together, we can break the cycle of violence and deprivation that stunts children's development; we can prevent neglect, abuse and exploitation; we can support child victims and ensure their access to justice; and we can provide the healing, recovery and reintegration services they desperately need.

145. Joining hands together, the sum of our forces will be zero: zero violence against children.